

County upgrading IT systems

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Hudson-Catskill Newspapers

Published:

Thursday, March 24, 2011 2:07 AM EDT

Columbia County government is going paperless.

By Oct. 1, county employees will be able to sign up for direct deposit, which they previously haven't been able to do. Timekeeping will be electronic, and budget transfers, after Board of Supervisors approval, will be logged automatically. And that's not all.

According to BOS Chairman Roy Brown, R-Germantown, the technology overhaul will be "soup-to-nuts."

The \$1.2 million project will be paid for over seven years with payments of \$170,000 each; County Controller Ron Caponera said the first payment will be bonded out this year. The rest will be added to the annual budget of the county's managed information systems department.

The process is, so far, three-and-a-half years in the making. The current system used by the county was implemented in 1993, said County Treasurer Ken Wilber.

Because a computerized system will free up time for employees who previously spent a lot of it on data input, county officials expect to see a return on the investment quickly.

The new system will help the county "move away from manual processing and physical paper," said MIS Director Randy Wheeler. "(It will) empower the workforce to do more with less time, money, and effort. The goal everywhere is to look for opportunities to eliminate paper."

Wheeler said he's expecting between 1 and 7 percent of total payroll costs to be saved overall — a hefty sum when you consider the county's total annual payroll is \$40 million.

Tyler Technologies, a publicly traded company that works with municipalities across the U.S., was chosen after a request for proposals from the county was released. Part of their contract with the county includes regular system updates, so similar technology doesn't lag further and further behind in Columbia County as it advances elsewhere.

"We have great experience doing this in New York," said Jeff Ornstein, a sales rep for Tyler. "We view this as a very long-term partnership."

Tyler will host the county's application and maintain it, freeing up the MIS department from server maintenance, annual update installation, software and information backups, etc.

The new system will mean no more paper time sheets — electronic time sheets will be sent to the payroll department and processed automatically.

“I see it as reducing redundancy,” said county Accounts Payable Director Diana Neceda. There will be no need for employees to physically enter the data in order for county employees to be paid. Right now, “we do a lot of things by paper,” she said.

Employees will also be able to log into the secure server and access their own information regarding their benefits package, vacation time, and sick time — they may be able to request vacation days through the system as well.

And when a new hire enters the county’s employ, Human Resources Director John Rutkey, Jr. will be able to enter that person into the new system, then send the information along electronically to the payroll department. Brown said that currently, the process of adding a new hire to the county system can take up to five months.

The county civil service commission will also be able to control its civil service exam information for county jobs, as well as town and school district jobs, which will expedite the information.

Wheeler said the system will be secure. “It is done in a very secure tunnel which is encrypted,” he said. “(It uses) point-to-point connections, which means it’s not something that can be hacked.”

Employee training will be a big part of the system’s implementation.

“There’s always challenge to overcome change,” Wheeler said. “It’s hard work, but we’ll get there and everybody will be happy for it...I don’t care how much you spend on the tools. They’re only as good as the education you provide.”

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